

The Messiah's Job Description

When the prophet Isaiah declared, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me..." (Isa. 61:1), he wasn't just describing the tasks of a prophet. He was handing the people of Israel a job description. He gives them a divine outline of what the Messiah would do when He finally came. The Jewish people had a lot of expectations of what the Messiah ought to do, and be, by the time Jesus was born.

They wanted a military hero. They wanted a political liberator. They wanted a King with a sword in His hand and vast armies at His back to come along, overthrow Rome, and restore the glory days of the kingdom under David and Solomon. But Isaiah told them the Messiah would do other, unexpected things.

According to Isaiah, the Messiah would bring good news to the poor. He would bind up the brokenhearted. He would proclaim freedom for the captives. He would release the prisoners from darkness. The Messiah would also comfort all who mourn, and rebuild the ancient ruins of the places that had been destroyed, (Isa. 61:1-4, paraphrased).

This is slow, relational work. Healing work. Human work. And in Luke 1, before Jesus ever preaches, heals, or rescues, He is already beginning this ministry – quietly, almost invisibly – in the womb of a virgin named Mary.

Advent reminds us that God's greatest works often begin in small, unexpected places. And so we turn to Luke 1:39-55 – Mary, Elizabeth, and the unexpected joy that changes the world. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn there with me this morning. **Read Luke 1:39-55.**

Call Me Blessed – But Don't Forget the Struggle!

Mary sings, "From now on all generations will call me blessed," (Luke 1:48). But Mary doesn't say she's blessed because her life is easy. She doesn't say she's blessed because she's strong, confident, or unshakable. She knows blessing comes wrapped in difficulty.

The Church often flattens Mary's story into something serene and sanitized. But the real Mary knew a few things. She understood the risk of being unmarried and pregnant. It could have been a death sentence for her. She knew the fear of being misunderstood.

She experienced the pain of childbirth. She surely wrestled with the uncertainty of the future – especially on Good Friday, when she stood at the foot of the cross watching her Son die for her and for all of us. Mary experienced confusion with God's calling. In another part of the Gospel, she asks the angelic messenger, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). Mary knew the long wait for promises not yet fulfilled.

"Blessed" doesn't mean "comfortable." She surely wasn't! "Blessed" doesn't mean "simple." And it doesn't mean "certain." There were a lot of unknowns to Mary

when she answered God's call – but she was willing to be used by Him anyways. When we look at the “heroes of the faith” – Mary, Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Esther, David, Peter, Paul – we often see only the polished version of their stories. We call them giants. We call them saints. We call them blessed. But before they were heroes, they were just ordinary people trying to say “yes” to God while being afraid, unsure, overwhelmed, and most times, completely unprepared.

The Church sometimes “others” our heroes – we tend to make them super-human and unrelatable. The truth is that ordinary people doing ordinary acts of obedience are the foundation of God's kingdom. So we ought to ask ourselves: “What simple act of faith might God be calling me to today?” “What small obedience could have long-term kingdom impact?” “Where might unexpected joy begin to grow if I simply say, ‘yes’?”

The Cost of Faithfulness – Yesterday and Today

There's a saying, “Hindsight is 20/20.” It's easy, centuries, or decades later, to call people like Martin Luther, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer blessed. In their lifetimes, they faced excruciating choices, conflicts, loneliness, and fear. Martin Luther didn't want to divide the Church. When he posted *The Ninety-Five Theses* on the cathedral door at Wittenberg, he did it with the intention that it would create a conversation that would result in calling the Church back to Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer didn't want to be involved in political resistance. He wanted the Church in Germany under the Nazis to be faithful in it's discipleship, instead of twisting Jesus into a Nazi-flag wrapped national symbol of the Reich. We honor Luther and Bonhoeffer now, but in their day, they walked through fire. The same is true for saints today.

Faithfulness still requires difficult choices. For instance, resisting greed and systems that harm others, or advocating for justice even when it's unpopular. Or stewarding creation with seriousness, rather than doing what's convenient. Or – I know this will light some people up, but I'm called to preach the Word of God, not tell folks what their itching ears want to hear – defending our LGBT siblings. God adores them. So should we. We should treat them with dignity and compassion. Protecting immigrant neighbors is another issue with which the Church writ large falls short. Caring for unhoused brothers and sisters. We should be challenging laws and structures that trap people in cycles of poverty or incarceration.

No one's going to call us blessed for these choices, for doing these things. Not right now, anyhow. But blessing isn't the goal. Our goal, as followers of Jesus Christ, is faithfulness to Him. When we do these things, we're being faithful to Jesus Christ, revealed to us through the Holy Scriptures. And faithfulness – though painful – often leads to unexpected joy.

The Hidden Labor of Love

Children rarely understand the cost of their parents' love. They don't know about the late nights. The extra shifts worked to have enough money to buy the Christmas

gifts. They don't hear the prayers whispered in the dark. They don't usually find out about the sacrifices that no one else sees. To the child, life feels normal. To the parent, every moment is an investment.

Mary's blessing carried the same hidden cost. It's love given with tears, hopes, fears, and sacrifice. Most blessings in life are the result of unseen faithfulness. Most holy callings require hidden labor. And yet, even in the unseen, joy quietly grows.

As another example, let's think about a high school senior, when he or she opens the acceptance letter from the college of their dreams. Their joy is electric – pure celebration, laughter, tears, relief. But there's more to the joy than just achievement. It also comes with the knowing that the hardest work is still ahead.

The high school senior knows there's going to be long nights of studying. There will be difficult classes. There's going to be a financial strain – especially if they aren't staying at home with Mom and Dad. They're going to have emotional stress. And they also go through the growing process, transitioning from adolescence into adulthood.

Joy isn't the absence of struggle. It's the presence of hope in the midst of it. Mary's joy – and Elizabeth's joy – is the same kind. It's a joy that knows pain is coming. A joy that trusts God through the unknown. These women have a joy that celebrates what God is doing – even though the future is uncertain. Faith, like education, is a long obedience. But the far side of obedience is joy!

The Messiah's – And Our – Work

Thinking back to the passage from Isaiah this morning. He gives us several tasks the Messiah will fulfill. If the Church is Christ's body, then these tasks are our tasks now. So we can – and should – take Isaiah's list and translate it into our community here in Shelby County. The first thing the Messiah does is give good news to the poor. Who are the poor here? What is "good news" for them? Is it food security? Affordable housing? Access to health care or mental health care? A living wage? A supportive community?

The second thing the Messiah does is bind up the brokenhearted. Who is grieving in our local church? Our workplaces? What losses are people carrying? A job? A relationship? A loved one? A sense of safety? A sense of belonging? What does comfort look like in their language?

We're told the Messiah proclaims freedom to the captives and releases the prisoners. Who is trapped? Some captives are behind bars. Others are held captive to addictions, debts, trauma, racism, generational cycles of harm. What would freedom look like for them? And how can we, as a local church, help carry even one burden for someone on the outside trying to begin again?

Faithfulness requires us to not just plant seeds. We also have to water, tend, and till the soil until life emerges. Justice is long-term work. Community transformation is long-term work.

Years ago I was told that the Church should focus only on Jesus, and the topic of justice shouldn't be preached on. The Jesus I read of in the Gospels is so focused on the marginalized – the lepers, the tax collectors, and us "sinners" – I can't help but talk

about justice and doing what's right for all people, because I believe that's what Jesus wants. He wants what's best for all people. That's why He came down and took the nails – in doing so, He gave us His very best. And so, we ought to give of our best for our brothers and sisters. Joy grows as we join God in the work He is doing – and has been doing – through the ages.

Sprouts, Winter Soil, Stalactites, and the Slow Work of God

Isaiah uses gardening imagery, “As the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seed to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations,” (Isa. 61:11). Some growth is slow. Some blessings take time. Some transformation emerges only after a long period of waiting. Gardeners prepare soil in the winter, long before planting begins.

About a month ago, I went along on a field trip with my 1st and 2nd graders from Cookson to the Ohio Caverns. Many of them had never been there before. It was really neat to see the look on their faces when they saw the stalagmites and stalactites. Those cave formations only grow maybe an inch every hundred years. God's healing and justice is often like that. Slow and steady – not instant.

What part of your life needs tending? What habits need pruning? What spiritual soil needs to be loosened? What seed of joy is hidden beneath the surface? Friends, whatever it is – God is already at work. And in time – if we wait, water, and trust – sprouts of righteousness and joy emerge.

Joy Shared is Joy Doubled

Hear again a piece of the Gospel lesson for today:

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her!” (Luke 1:39-45).

This moment shows us that joy grows in community. We see two women – one young, one old. Both of them are carrying miracles. Mary carries the Savior of the world, and Elizabeth carries the one sent to prepare the way for the Lord – John the Baptist. Both of these women are chosen by God. Both of them live in the tension of joy and fear.

When Mary enters Elizabeth's home Elizabeth's baby leaps. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Joy erupts in the room! Some people believe sharing good news will “jinx” it. Mary teaches us that sharing joy strengthens faith rather than weakening it.

Who needs to share joy with you? Who needs you to encourage the miracle growing in their life? What joy could be doubled today simply by being spoken? In an individualistic age, God invites us back into connection. He calls us back into a shared life, with mutual support. Joy shared becomes joy multiplied.

Mary's Magnificat

Mary sings:

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as He promised our ancestors,” (Luke 1:46-55).

Mary sings out of deep spiritual insight. Her song's not a lullaby for a baby. It's a cry for a revolution. A new world – the new creation – is being birthed through her. She proclaims a God who scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, lifts up the humble, fills the hungry, empties the wealthy, remembers the forgotten, and keeps His promises.

God always keeps His promises – and He gives them to us in the Bible. That's why it's so important for the Church today to be plugged into it, reading His promises. If we don't read it, we don't know what He's promised us, and we don't know the real Jesus Christ. See, this is what happened in Europe 80 or 90 years ago. The Church got comfortable. It got lazy. It quit reading God's word, and so when the Nazi's came along and proclaimed a flag-wrapped Jesus with blond hair and blue eyes the Church in Europe bought the lie – hook, line, and sinker. I'm going to say this right now – Jesus loves America. But He loves every other land and nation on the face of the earth just as much.

Mary's joy is rooted in God's justice. It's joy that confronts evil. Joy that refuses despair. It's joy that believes God's transformation is already underway. She sings because God has remembered His people. She sings because Hope has taken on flesh within her womb. She sings because joy has broken into the world.

The Church's Calling – Unexpected Joy in Justice

Joy and justice go hand-in-hand. Joy is the fruit of working for justice. As a local church we should be asking ourselves some questions this Advent season. How do we embrace the joy of working for justice? How can we prepare ourselves for the conflict that comes with standing up for the hurting? How can we embody Isaiah's vision in tangible, local ways?

Justice isn't a quick project. It's a life-long calling. New Hope, your name is an expression of your call. You've been called to give new hope to God's people! So how do we do that? I ask you these questions, because I don't have the answers. God does – and He'll show you the way when you commit to working together for His glory! Joy grows when we choose faithfulness over comfort, compassion over apathy, and courage over silence.

Late theologian Howard Thurman once wrote:

When refugees seek deliverance that never comes, And the heart consumes itself, if it would live, Where little children age before their time, And life wears down the edges of the mind, Where the old man sits with mind grown cold, While bones and sinew, blood and cell, go slowly down to death, Where fear companions each day's life, And Perfect Love seems long delayed. CHRISTMAS IS WAITING TO BE BORN: In you, in me, in all mankind.¹

The meeting of Elizabeth and Mary reminds us that blessing often comes wrapped in struggle. They teach us that God's work is slow, patient, steady. Small acts of faith can change the world. Joy grows when shared. Community strengthens courage. Justice is part of joy. And finally, God keeps His promises – always. He IS faithful – even when we are not!

Unexpected joy is the joy of Advent. Joy that breaks into fear. Joy that grows in hidden places. Joy that emerges from obedience. Joy that blossoms in community. Joy that transforms the world. May God plant that kind of joy in us today. May God grow unexpected joy through us this season. And may God make us people who – like Mary – say “Yes!”

Prayer: Gracious God, As Mary sang her song of joy in the midst of uncertainty, help us to sing our own songs of faith in these uncertain times. Plant in us the courage to say “Yes!”, the patience to trust Your slow and steady work, and the compassion to join You in healing the world. Let unexpected joy rise within us – joy rooted in justice, shaped by hope, and strengthened in community. Make us bearers of Your Light everywhere we go. Amen.